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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative and naturalistic study, a teacher study group (TSG) examined cultural variables impacting the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom through focus group discussions and critical incident reports. Participants observed that, whereas cross-cultural communication (or miscommunication) of an international nature very definitely was a factor, another influential element in their classroom experience stemmed from ambiguities or conflicts arising from their adaptation to the professional culture of the institutions where they were teaching: especially as non-credit instructors working in a primarily for-credit setting, uncertainty about their own professional identity became a significant dimension of their experience as teachers. Participating in the TSG contributed to their improved understanding of these diverse currents. (Author/SM)

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ABSTRACT: In this qualitative and naturalistic study, a teacher study group (TSG) examined cultural variables impacting on the ESL classroom, through focus group discussions and critical incident reports. Participants observed that, whereas cross-cultural communication (or miscommunication) of an international nature very definitely was a factor, another influential element in their classroom experience stemmed from ambiguities or conflicts arising from their adaptation to the professional culture of the institution where they were teaching: especially as non-credit instructors working in a principally for-credit setting, uncertainty about their own professional identity became a significant dimension of their experience as teachers. Participating in the TSG contributed to their improved understanding of these diverse currents.

Background

Putnam and Borko (2000) argue for the joint responsibility of both teachers and students for the creation of a classroom environment in which profoundly effective learning can take place. This viewpoint illuminates the principle that, as Stevick (1998: 412) notes, the "drive to understand oneself and the impact of one's work on others lies at the core of teaching", for it underlines the importance of conceptualizing teacher self-understanding as a form of participation in an entire learning community, rather than as a more strictly individual endeavour. Consequently, we may expect that new teachers' development of personal-practical knowledge (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988) will be influenced by their growing awareness of identity within what might be termed a classroom micro-society comprising themselves and their learners. This perspective led us to focus on the concept of the ESL classroom as a culture into which new teachers were finding their way, with the allied possibility that relevant cultural variables might include either or both of broadly international cultural mechanisms or local classroom cultural structures holding only for the specific learning group.

Description of the Study

Five participants, five female and one male, took part in a TSG which met five times at two-week intervals over the period of February to April, 2001. Both researchers were also present at each TSG meeting. Those sessions, each lasting approximately one hour each, were audio-taped. The participants were teachers in an Ontario university Intensive English Language Program. Aged from the mid-twenties to mid-thirties, all were English native speakers. Their prior teaching experience ranged from three to seven years. All participants held at least a university Certificate in TESL; three of the five were in the process of completing a TESL M.Ed.

The TSG discussions focussed on cultural variables in ESL teaching and learning. Although no specific list of questions was followed, each meeting looked at a particular area of culture: (1)

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Types of Interaction, and Micro-Community Structures and Roles; (2) Work and Play, and Space and Time; (3) Gender Roles; (4) Solidarity and Caring, and Instrumentality; and (5) a review of previous sessions, debriefing, and closure.

For the purposes of this paper, verbatim transcripts of the tapes from all five sessions were analysed to highlight themes actually raised by the participants. To improve validity, a summary of the analysis was provided to all participants as feedback after the sessions were over, in order to elicit confirmation.

Issues Raised in the Study Group

Throughout discussion of each of the various aspects of culture in ESL teaching and learning that were broached during the series of TSG sessions, the most clearly recurring theme was the challenge of dealing with cultural generalizations: in a nutshell, how to learn from experience without falling into valueless stereotypes. As the meetings progressed, debate among the participants led to a succession of different proposed approaches to this problem, at various times either more optimistic or more pessimistic. During that process, the discussants grappled with professional-development issues that were at the heart of their self-discovery as ESL teachers.

As relatively new teachers, participants in the study were acutely conscious of the need to define themselves professionally in relation to their students. In this connection, the first generalization to be tried out was the proposition that everyone would be most comfortable in an informal environment. For instance, participant Stacey (pseudonym, as in all cases) noted that "I like to feel close", and she and her colleagues all seemed to agree with Michelle, who observed, "I do feel strange" when addressed by a formal title like *Teacher* rather than by a first name. Reflecting on how best to cope with such unexpectedly formality, Dana commented dryly, "I've trained myself," but plainly the desire was for a degree of Canadian-seeming informality that could not readily be attained. As Dagmar joked, it's not easy to be formally identified as an impersonal "cardboard" teacher. All the same, it was recognized that for many students a formal relationship with the teacher "is what they're used to" (Michelle).

It was soon conceded, however, that this teacher-identity question was complicated by rather sharp differences among student expectations. For example, Stacey reported that most of her Japanese students quite quickly accustomed themselves to using her first name, whereas the majority of Mexican students resolutely continued with *Teacher*. Moreover, she added, there was the influence of what seemed to be just "personal choice": for example in one class, two Spanish speakers called her *Teacher* but one other called her *Stacey*, perhaps also reflecting the fact that the latter student had already been with her for a term before. Furthermore, as Bart argued, "put yourselves in the students' position": when some of the participants themselves had – not so long before – been students in a TESL Certificate program, they too had sometimes found it reassuring to address their professors in quite formal terms, as a way of simplifying the social situation. Overall, it was clear that "the people who want to say the honorific things are going to keep on saying it" no matter how their teachers try to influence them (Dana).

The developing discussion made it plain that these teachers' most basic challenge was in fact to find their own place in the new cultural world of the ESL classroom; the initial question of titles of address was just an early symptom of a much broader phenomenon. Participants discovered that factors previously considered unimportant were taking on unexpected

significance. For instance, apparently provoked by the debate around formality and deference, the issue of age came up. Dagmar, the youngest teacher in the program, candidly explained that "I kept my age a secret because ... a lot of my students are older than me... I wanted to get their respect first and, at the end, I could say, by the way, I'm only twenty-five! [laughter]". And Michelle, another youthful member of the group, had similar feelings about the connection between relative age and respect for the teacher. This thread in the discussion evolved as the TSG meetings progressed, with the general issue of respect for the teacher emerging as a key focal point in participants' refinement of their cultural expectations around their cultural identity.

Two prominent elements of this motif were punctuality and academic values. Students' punctuality and regular attendance were clearly very important to all participants, but it was difficult for them to be sure of what they could or should expect. Numerous semi-jocular anecdotes were shared and enjoyed; yet, there was considerable tension as well. On the one hand, Michelle could joke that "I've been known to close the door and put a table in front of the door" to shock persistent latecomers: "I'm not sure it's the best teacher technique but, you know, it's been a strategy!" But on the other hand, there was clearly a widespread feeling that "we need some mutual respect here" (Dagmar). In Stacey's words,

> I find it difficult because they're adults. They're adults, period. I would never assume... I would never even think about doing this anywhere. Like, there's a certain form of respect for people in general. I have... I have twelve people looking at me, ready to go, and I've got the stragglers coming in and, you know, what right do they have?

Academic values proved to be a similarly critical issue. Although many students were perceived as sharing their instructors' focus on effective learning, a significant minority seemed to be "on vacation" (Michelle), totally uninterested in studious effort. For Dagmar, the matter was clear-cut: "I think... they're adults and they make their own decisions"; so, they should take responsibility for studying seriously. However, although annoyed also, Dana was willing to give some weight to her feeling that in many cases "their parents have sent them" to Canada in order to learn English and get a degree, with little consideration for what individual students may actually want. And Bart likewise commented that, if his prior teaching experience in Asia could be trusted, many students might come to Canada with wildly unrealistic expectations of North American education as extremely casual and unstructured, in which case "their expectations haven't been met, and that ticks them off and ... it completely surprises them."

Such empathetic perspectives arose from time to time throughout the TSG series but, interestingly enough, they were particularly salient near the beginning and, as we will see, near the end, with a striking decline around the mid-point. From the start, there was an explicit commitment to open-mindedness endorsed in one way or another by all discussants. Bart was particularly emphatic about this, noting for example,

> I don't want to make assumptions about what other students... their perceptions of me to begin with: for me, it's always an on-going, a kind of on-going self-study to see how students will relate with me. And the patterns just keep growing. Instead of getting more clearly defined, the patterns keep going wider and wider.

Bart's early uneasiness with premature generalizations was echoed by the other participants. For instance, Stacey cautiously warned that too often "we carry baggage" when approaching new

cultural situations, and Dana perceptibly observed that, rather than taking a firmly non-ethnocentric stance, "we sit on the fence a lot" when confronted by the temptation to stereotype. Moreover, Michelle was willing to recognize from the outset that, in any case, a certain level of predictive ability can be a helpful result of observant experience: "I think we could say any country in the world, based on our ESL experience, and we could give you a line of something that we feel is reflective of who they are." The great test, of course, will always lie in knowing where to draw the line between general foresight and rigid stereotyping. And so, as the discussion opened up, the complexity and many-sidedness of cultural inquiries quite rapidly became apparent. Furthermore, this insight was not only self-directed. As classroom leaders, participants felt a duty to encourage open and welcoming attitudes in their students as well, a task which they discovered with some dismay was not going to be without its difficulties. For one thing, it had to be understood that students could readily be "shocked" (Stacey) by unfamiliar values or practices, and in the unaccustomed English-language environment of the classroom, ESL students "actually, like, literally have a hard time understanding different students... it's a very stressful experience for them" (Bart). Consequently, students should be expected to be quite preoccupied with their own adjustment concerns and so, as Michelle asked,

> What do we do about the other students from other cultures developing these ideas about different cultures in their class? The Spanish speakers, what do they think of the Chinese? The Chinese, what do they say about the Koreans?

All the same, individual students were regularly providing participants with reasons for optimism in this respect. Noting the variations of conduct and attitudes among young women from the same cultural group in one of her classes, Dagmar opined that "it's interesting with the, the dynamic within a culture." And noteworthy instances of within-group variability were presented by other discussants as well: "I have very strong people in my class that are breaking out of their own cultural tradition" (Dana); or "I think, too, a lot can be based on individuals, or especially on certain groups of individuals in each class" (Stacey). In this spirit, Michelle suggested, "I think they recognize that maybe... what they do at home, and what everyone else does: I think they start to question those roles." Generally, there was admiration for students' adventurous resilience as they faced daunting personal questions: "Trying to see what they want to do and who they want to be here for the first time ... Who do I want to be? And what kind of patterns do I want to follow?" (Michelle). And yet, in the changing and complicated classroom milieu, such developments were difficult to track. As Dana contributed with characteristic tartness, at times students can be truly inscrutable: "We're away from everybody, so we can say exactly what we think, or we can say what the teacher expects because the teacher is Western" – take your pick!

In these fluid and uncertain circumstances, all participants felt considerable pressure. As the TSG sessions continued, discussants began increasingly to sense that in some respects their own entry into the culture of ESL teaching was perhaps even more stressful than their students' initiation into life and study in Canada. For one thing, their students had at least one very clear-cut identity: "they're a paying customer and they can do whatever they want" (Stacey). By contrast, as instructors in a comparatively minor non-credit and cost-recovery program attached to a university, these teachers felt rather marginalized by their half-academic and half-commercial "dual mentality" (Michelle). In their own minds, they found it hard to "keep our

image as an academic program" (Dagmar); but even more discouragingly, as Dana reported, "I've had students a lot say things like, Are you a professor? What's your title?" Added to this was a growing dissatisfaction with the perennially low rate of ESL salaries, which led to the inference that "if the teacher feels that the institution isn't investing in them, they won't invest back" because "the pay, the amount of investment that's involved is reflected in the professionalism" that employees feel (Bart).

As a result, by the mid-point of TSG sequence, participants tended to sink into a period of much reduced confidence. There was a momentary current of frustration and sometimes even anger. Dagmar reached the point of declaring, "I feel like I'm teaching little groups... not a unified class." And the others expressed similarly pessimistic views. For Michelle, the most discouraging factor was her apparent powerlessness when, for instance, "there has been a lot of antagonism toward a couple of people who come from a particular culture, and that's ... they've been slotted, and therefore there's not going to be any break-down." Dana, momentarily viewing her students in the guise almost of her own imagined children, sighed, "They have not experienced freedom like this, they just go crazy," and Stacey, attempting to concentrate calmly on pedagogical issues, still had to accept the depressing thought that, by hesitating to interact with classmates from other cultures, students inevitably "lose the focus, working with their own group, they lose the focus on the target language." But Bart was surely the most downcast, abandoning his earlier idealism in favour of this cheerless conclusion: "I'll take the risk and say that for the most part cultures don't mix well. This is why wars happen, this is why borders are set up."

Happily, as the series of discussions drew towards its close, the level of optimism picked up noticeably. Dana, calling attention to participants' shared background experience of Canadian multiculturalism, reminded the group that it would be unreasonable to set expectations too high:

> They haven't coexisted in communities such as Canada for 10,000 years, or 10 years, and therefore they're expected to do something that they have never needed to do before. And we take it, I take it for granted.

At first Bart was difficult to convince, even questioning whether in fact the multicultural classroom environment might not easily be subverted by students' self-serving readiness "to say, it's a cultural, it's a cultural difference, instead of saying, there's a personal issue." But backing away from this negativity, he ultimately reached the very balanced view that making cautious cultural generalizations reflects

> the life of the human, to perceive and to remember and to bank certain things in your memory... And yet, I think it's up to us to say, Well, there's a lot more to be put in my bank before I make a stereotype. But if we disregard that fact,... we're also doing ourselves a disservice, we're blind, in effect.

Always tending to be more up-beat, Stacey eventually declared, "I'm finding myself unable to stereotype any more... I see them more on an individual basis, and I'm seeing different types of people within one culture." Dagmar would not be drawn on the stereotyping question, but she did become at least guardedly optimistic about her main concern, which was creating a positive classroom environment: "it really does depend on the class" because quite often the wholesomely multicultural "classroom culture seems to dominate more and the home culture kind of disappears more." And Michelle, setting aside her earlier doubts, finally reached an analysis

rather like Bart's, allowing that when accumulating new experience and assessing existing generalizations, "you have to bring it in and alter what's there;" for her, it became a source of pride to be able to say, "I think that basically if we go into this profession, I think we're ready to do that. I think, probably, if not the most open-minded group of professions, we're right up there. That comes from the nature of our profession."

Discussion

The genuineness and intensity of the discussion outlined above confirms the effectiveness of the TSG as a vehicle for peer-group exploration of professional-development issues, as already proposed in the literature (e.g. Clair, 1998). Within their TSG, participants felt comfortable debating personal concerns and expressing emotionally-charged views that they almost certainly would not have been able to share in any other professional context. As a result, the eventual views reached by discussants – as important as those intellectual outcomes were – should not be seen as the only consequence of the exercise. The upsurge of solidarity among participants, as evidenced by their willingness to carry through a rather lengthy and demanding mutual-support project of this nature, provided them with companionship and encouragement at a point in their careers when they were facing difficult challenges as relative newcomers to the profession. At that time, all five expressed satisfaction with the TSG experience, and it is interesting to note that, not long afterwards, two of them left for new positions of their choice at other institutions and the remaining three successfully competed for more senior posts in the same program. Certainly, this TSG series was simultaneous with significant professional stock-taking, confidence-building, and positive change.

Moreover, the intellectual odyssey through which these five teachers navigated was informative in itself. Although no doubt strongly grounded in the specifics of this one particular institutional context, participants' insights touched on mechanisms of complexity and subtlety with implications far beyond the original site. The TSG experience proved to be an opportunity for movement towards the development of rewarding praxis, the balanced combination of reflective practice with practical theorization that is the key to professional growth, stamina, and happiness.

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